

Spiritual Quest in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's : A New Dominion

Abstract

The East and West have different ideas about spirituality. The East has always been regarded as a spiritual land, while the West has always been termed as a materialistic land. In the East there has been efforts to erase "I" because this word "I" breeds pride in the person, the West has always emphasized on this pronoun "I." The best known exports of East to the West have been great saints like Swami Vivekananda who gave a new dimension to the meaning and goal of life. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one important writer who has been influenced by both East and the West. She was born in the West, but married an Indian. So she has the objectivity to look at the Eastern spiritual traditions from the eyes of a Westerner. At the same time she acquired the Indian spirituality by immersing herself in the Eastern spiritual traditions. The current paper is a study of her novel *A New Dominion*.

Keywords: Spirituality, East, West, Religion.

Introduction

The East cherishes the idea not of individual lives but of life, where the individual is considered to be "merely a part of the phenomenon." Swami Vivekananda had put forth the view that the Hindus believe that every living creature is an emanation of the same pure white light of the Divine Being (191). The centre is located in the body and this centre changes from body to body so that "death is but a change." This "spark of the Divine" passes from one personality to another till perfection is attained. Man constantly strives to release the soul from the pangs of rebirth for the East believes in the philosophy of "the final flowing of the success of the successful man (Zimmer 43-44)." When the realization dawns on the human beings that they are merely instruments in the expression of the spirit they outgrow their individualism and shed their egoistic claim that man is the centre of all life and universe. This universality of an individual paves the way for Universal love and non-violence.

Aim of the Study

Ruth Praver Jhabvala is a Westerner who is married to an Indian. She possesses the unique point of view of an outsider who has gradually become an insider. The paper tries to study her point of view and how she views spirituality and spiritual traditions in India.

Review of Literature

India has the richest body of spiritual literature beginning from Vedas, the oldest books known to mankind. While researching for the paper the researcher not only went through the ancient literature of the seers but also the literature written by modern spiritual masters like Swami Vivekananda. There have been several books that have been written about spirituality, but the writer did not come across any paper on Ruth Praver Jhabvala. The other books include *The Teachings of Swami Vivekananda (1971)*, Heinrich Zimmer's *The Philosophies of India (1951)*, S Radhakrishnan's *East and West :Some Reflections(1955)*. The researcher has not come across any new paper on the subject.

Duration of Study

The study for the paper was done during 2017 and 2018.

Philosophies shape religions and although no individual is born to any religion still varied differences in attitude are visualized. The Christian religion preaches that "each human soul had its beginnings at its birth into the world... whereas the Hindu religion asserts that the spirit of man is an emanation of the Eternal Being and had no more a beginning" (Swami Vivekananda 188-189). The Hindu worships God in His various forms, which to a Christian is fascinating. C. Rajagopalachari states this practice thus: "God is sought in a medley of forms for God is a Supreme Medley" (Cited in Ramakrishna 57). In almost every religion God is worshipped in

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form or as symbols and with every form or symbol a passionate devotion is associated and for the worshipper every thing is holy and pious. The Holy Man is important in all religions. Hinduism cherishes the belief that "the soul can receive impulses from another soul and from nothing else" (Swami Vivekananda 45-46). The spiritual side of man may not necessarily be in proportion to the intellectual development. When an individual is out to seek Eternal Love he is deemed to have fulfilled the duties of that stage of life to which he is born and is prepared to forgo his worldly pursuits. Years of mediation, discipline and dedication makes an individual a Guru who is above his individual self. As Dr. Radhakrishnan puts it "Nature is not opposed to spirit. It is attachment to nature that is inconsistent with spiritual dignity. Asceticism is opposed not to enjoyment but to attachment"(66). The parish priest guides his parish in Christianity in order to ultimately inherit "the Kingdom of God."

The East has a firm belief that in his earthly life every Man is a victim of Time and there are times in his life when everything seems to support him and he rides the wave. His faults and deficiencies all stand to his advantage when the Time is favourable. For the East, "Time proceeds in cycles, now expanding, now contracting ... No one can battle time. Its tides are mysterious. One must learn to accept them and submit to their unalterable rhythm" (Zimmer 100). The relentless time flow swallows individuals and places them at the mercy of the various destructive forces of death like human tyranny, injustice, disease etc. Time has the power to crumble everything to dust. Fatalism and Stoic suffering gradually stand as an accepted creed. The East believes in destroying the evil by suffering to the extent that evil remains nothing but becomes a positive enjoyment. The East, nevertheless, signifies historically, philosophically, sociologically and even temperamentally, an orientation towards the inner and the unseen, the categorical and the absolute. These values are associated with and are quite commonly interpreted as, passivity, stagnation and a kind of conservatism that seems antithetical to the modern race for material acquisitions. Idealism, mysticism and fatalism of the East are ranged against the pragmatism, materialism and individualism of the West.

Swami Vivekananda had once asked, "Who knows which is the true ideal? The apparent power and strength as held in the West or the fortitude of suffering of the East?" Raja Ram Mohan Roy realized with agony and sorrow that "the bigoted Christian was as conceited as the bigoted Hindu?"(cited in Iyenger 31). Keshab Chunder Sen tried to forge links between Hinduism and Christianity with a realization that they were not really incompatible with each other. Mahatma Gandhi's ethics were also rooted in Indian tradition with close affiliation with Christian tradition. Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru in his Azad Memorial Lecture had remarked : "I have often wondered that if our race forgot the Buddha, the Upanishads and the great epics, what then will it be like? (cited in Iyenger 312)"

Ruth Jhabvala, a novelist of unequalled insight, grace and emotional power, has a deep

penetration and multipronged analysis of the variegated facets of life of the people of India as well as Europe. In her novel, *A New Dominion* she takes up the spiritual quest of her characters. Here, the West is represented by three girls, Lee, Margaret and Evie who are on a spiritual hunt in the new dominion, Raymond, a visitor classed as a tourist and Miss Charlotte, a Christian missionary who has spent about 30 years in India in social work. Raymond finds it difficult to come to terms with the spirit of India; for to him, India is only a great panorama and a historical curiosity. For Miss Charlotte, India is a challenging country whose crying need is social amelioration, educational reforms and a good life based on economic security. Whereas Raymond and Miss Charlotte embody the rational, scientific and moral aspects of the culture of the West, Lee, Margaret and Evie represent a sort of dissatisfaction with it. The three girls are weary of the Western machine - ridden materialistic trends and the commercial stoginess. Dissatisfied with their circumstances they, as a protest, leave the West and crave for the experience of a spiritually rich India, with her god-men, her Swamis, who they feel will bring succour to their tormented soul and transform them into new beings providing them with a life governed by unity of mind, body and soul.

Lee gradually accepts, as do the Indians, the over - crowding in buses, and the resulting discomfort without any grudge :

The public transport was always over - crowded, crammed upto the bursting - point. Everyone was travelling. They went to attend weddings, join pilgrimages, visit relatives at distant places. They brought many children with them, and some livestock and a variety of shabby bundles.... Journeys were always long, for, in order to get from one place to another, great distances had to be traversed. Everyone accepted the over-crowding and the ensuing heat, smells and discomfort without question. Lee also accepted them (ND 2)

The aim with which Lee comes to India is "to lose herself - as she liked to put it - to find herself" (ND 2) She is enterprising and adventurous and has come to India "to try to learn" (ND 32) and thus she moves freely and unconventionally at all levels of the Indian life. Lee is essentially "truthful, with others, of course, but first of all with herself, she wanted her whole life to be based only on truth found and tested by herself" (ND 216-17). Her search for the meaning of life is emotional and not intellectual, which is very far away from the spiritual progress for which she mistakes it to be. She has even begun to accept the fact that it is the fate of many to suffer from hunger and disease.

Lee meets Margaret, on her visit to Miss Charlotte's Christian mission, who has come to India for spiritual salvation. Margaret is pure, has a firm

personality and a definite goal in mind. She had revolted against the convention - ridden household, the commercialism, the pretentiousness and the falsity of the English middle - class society. Her revolt was against the hollowness and the nothingness of the British society and she comes to India to quench her spiritual thirst and her hunger for self-fulfilment. This decision on her part was not a momentous one but a definite one. For, as Lee writes about Margaret, "she's a very definite kind of a girl. Even her coming here was a definite decision. She didn't just drift into it the way I did ... Margaret came here because she had to. It was an active step of revolt against her life at home and her family" (ND 27).

Lee and Margaret seek a merging of their selves with that of the Swamiji, a symbol of India's heritage of mysticism and spiritual glory. Lec, Margaret and Evie try to become "insiders" to the Ashram, a prominent part of the 'new dominion'. Evie even more intensely identifies herself with what she believes to be the soul of India as embodied in the Swamiji. She has an implicit faith in Swamiji's spiritual powers and his purity of mind and action. She declares that the relationship of the disciple with the guru is the most powerful, and it even cancels the blood relationships.

Margaret falls ill due to hepatitis in the Ashram, and refuses to take the help of the modern - day treatment for the believes that "these diseases that people get in India, they're not physical, they're purely psychic. We only get them because we try to resist India - because we shut ourselves up in our little Western egos and don't want to give ourselves. But once we learn to yield, then they just fall away" (ND 146). Like Evie, Margaret also has full faith and belief in the Swamiji and in the ancient form of Indian medicine like it's written in the Shastras (ND 136). Lack of proper care and treatment leads to Margaret's ruin and death. After her death the question of her burial or cremation arises. Evie says that she was a Hindu, for, "becoming a Hindu is not like becoming a Christian. You don't have to take formal baptism or anything but freely assent to the Truth within you" (ND 207). Thus, the three English girls bestow all their affections, their hearts and souls on the Swamiji.

The Swamiji, of course, has a magnetic personality and is capable of creating illusions of hope and bliss through a skillful use of persuasive words, solicitous gestures and altruistic facial expression. He is a type as well as an individual and represents a new phenomenon in the modern India which may be described as the emergence of the spurious god-men, though he is a person in his own right (Shahane 118). The Swamiji is worldly, sensual and materialistic, and wishes to claim the bodies and souls of all his disciples. He even seeks to obliterate the personal identities of his followers. He has no qualms, either moral or religious, and in fact, becomes the agent of ruin and death of Margaret by manoeuvring her into rejecting modern medical treatment for her hepatitis.

However, Raymond, a tourist to India, finds in Swamiji a "cheerful and amusing company" a relaxed person who gives an impression of "tremendous energy" (ND 120). Swamiji's helps

himself generously to a lunch in an air-conditioned hotel at Raymond's expense and asks Raymond about "little points of etiquette" (ND 121) as a preparation for his foreign tour. His alacrity in accepting Raymond's polite invitation to lunch and his unfolding of plans for spreading his message suggest that he is quick to exploit others for his own material gains. He is not an old-fashioned innocent idealist rather he is an opportunist who is ready to take quick advantage of the modern technological developments. He wishes to travel the entire globe until his movement becomes "a world-wide religion uniting men of all creeds and all colours into one family and so bringing peace and harmony into the world" (ND 119). He considers his movement essentially of today, of now. He explains this to Raymond thus:

In the old days men of high spiritual development had only limited resources at their disposal with which to radiate outwards; hence their influence had also been limited in scope. But nowadays, thanks to the developments of the modern world, everything could work jet - swift, enabling Swami's beams to penetrate into the furthest corner of the remotest country on the map. This was progress indeed ! He would travel everywhere by aeroplane and helicopter, and also multiply his presence by means of television appearances. The printed word would not be neglected, and besides syndicated articles about himself and his work in all leading newspapers of the world, there would be feature articles with illustrations in photo-magazines ... (ND 119-20).

The Swamiji goes on to regard the curious and admiring Western tourist around him "in a sort of easy, speculative manner as if one day perhaps, if he wanted to, if he cared to, they would all be his" (ND123). The Swamiji explains further that it is only when you have given up all enjoyment so that it is no longer enjoyment that you can have these things back.

Mrs. Jhabvala makes it clear that the Swamiji is, under the guise of the Indian sage hood, driven by a craving for power. He calls his Ashram the "Universal Society for Spiritual Regeneration in Modern World." Ambiguity surrounds Swamiji's activities and there exist two possible interpretations of his behaviour : mysticism and spirituality on the one hand and charlatanism and opportunism on the other. The Swamiji was clever enough to set up his Ashram outside Banaras, so that the new souls could be inspired with a new spirit. "The Ashram was not actually in Banaras but ten miles outside it. This was deliberate policy on Swamiji's part : he did not wish to batten on the holiness of the past, but to inspire new souls with a new spirit" (ND 65). But he already plans for the expansion of the Ashram on modern lines and makes his disciples feel that the present discomforts

were actually designed by him to break the disciples in endurance.

In the Ashram, the Indians and the Westerners are encouraged by the Swamiji "to think themselves as one family." (ND 66) But the attitudes of Indians and the Westerners are distinct. Initially Lee and Margaret find it difficult "to sing with the same abandon as the others. They are stiff and shy, locked up within themselves" (ND 67). This difference is prominent in the case of the injured dog which cries terribly in pain near the Ashram. Lee wanted to have the dog put out of its misery, but the Swamiji bluntly rejects this, saying: "Everything must be experienced to the end Everything must unfold and ripen We must accept and enjoy, or accept and endure, as the case may be. Because we need both enjoyment and endurance, both sun and storm, so that we may ripen into our fullest possibility. Isn't it wonderful that even a dog should be allowed to grow into such ripeness" (ND 134).

Apart from the Swamiji, there are two religious ladies in the novel. One is Miss Charlotte, an English missionary who has been in India for the last 30 years and has led a very dedicated, "spartan life." Her concern is with India's need for social amelioration and educational reform. Despite her long stay in India she has still remained very English with her bent towards and passion for theatre viewing. On meeting Margaret, Miss Charlotte warns her against using the Indian remedies for her disease. She says:

It was true these Indian powders were often very efficacious, but on the other hand it happened that the disease could get a deeper grip than the patient suspected. Experience had unfortunately taught her that this was not unusual with Westerners coming to India and unaccustomed to its food or water or climate; and that in their case it was only the most powerful antibiotics that had any effect Yes, ... spiritual harmony was fine, was very good, but we did live in physical bodies too and we couldn't achieve much if we failed to look after those. (ND 152-53)

On Margaret's death, her concern lies over a Christian prayer and is glad at the prospect of returning to England. She tells Raymond, "still, home is home" (ND 155).

The second such figure of wisdom is Banubai, described as a "prophetess". She is small, old, toothless, wrinkled, "universally playful like the sun and the wind that play on all alike," besides being "universally indifferent" (ND 147). Superficially she has some resemblance to the Swamiji. Lee and Raymond particularly feel that both Swamiji and Banubai have eyes that gaze into people's thoughts. Banubai not only has exceptional insights into the visitors' mind but she also uses it to extend whatever help she can give.

In portraying Banubai, Mrs. Jhabvala tries to give as rational an explanation of her powers as is

possible: "She had always", says Mrs. Jhabvala herself, "been an unusual person with unusual gifts. She could look deep into other people's personalities, and it enabled her to have an immediate intuition of what activated them, that it was often possible for her to tell them something about their past and make a guess at their future. She gained quite a reputation that way and people began to come to her for guidance". (ND 117). Initially people, including a number of sophisticated, highly westernized visitors, came to her as a curiosity while some of them seemed truly impressed by her powers.

Banubai is a strange character, difficult for the European mind to understand. She dislikes Raymond because he is incapable of learning from her, and of realizing the bankruptcy of his own culture despite its 200 years of dominance. She tells him that because of their cultural bankruptcy and empty and meaningless lives, they have now started to explore and learn the truths which have been hidden and stored away through the centuries. Further, she explains to Raymond that "to learn from us you have to be wide open. And full of humility!" (ND 161)

The predicament of a Westerner vis-a-vis the Swamiji is summed up by Banubai thus: "Foreigners come to India because they are bored in the West. They pretend to be in search of spiritual values, but because they don't know what true spiritual values are, they fasten themselves on to harmful elements, who only help to drive them deeper into their disturbed egos, and so not only do they themselves suffer bad consequences but also all sorts of poisonous influences are released, polluting the air breathed in by truly spiritual Indians" (ND 173).

Though the mystic woman lives on a spiritual plane, she still retains a lively interest in the world, and all its "passing show" (ND 104). She lives in an old house by the river and one room of this house is held by the offices of the University of Universal synthesis which serves as a living quarter for its founder - president. He reveals to Raymond the practical details of this University, his work and the attitudes of the Westerners and Indians. "Not unfeeling but rational, rational. For the Westerner the mind comes first, than the heart. With us it is topsy-turvy, or vice-versa. It is the aim and basis of my University to unite these two tendencies of the human constitution, to educate the mind in the language of the heart and the heart in the language of the mind. This synthesis achieved, then we shall truly have a fully rounded human being." (ND 140).

In the final analysis in *A New Dominion* Mrs. Jhabvala has brought together the Indian and the Western values either in association or in conflict. The Westerners throng to India to find an answer to their emotional vacuum which is the result of their materialistic, individualistic, self-centered society. Coming to India they attach themselves to the Swamis whom they take to be the symbols of spirituality, the inheritors of Indian mysticism. But all Swamis do not turn out to be genuine, and they are influenced by the modern times, where there is an increasing craze for money and power.

Conclusion

Mrs. Jhabvala finds it difficult for the Western consciousness to come to terms with the attitude of the Indians for she finds it very hard for the rational Europeans to adopt the Indian beliefs. The Westerners feel some frustration and disillusionment at the end of their experiences. Based on her own experiences and those of the other Westerners, who have spend an appreciable time in India, she finds that they all go through a cycle of intense emotional variation in their quest:

There is a cycle that Europeans by Europeans I mean all Westerners, including Americans -- tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage, tremendous enthusiasm -- everything Indian is marvellous; second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous; third stage, everything Indian abominable. For some people it ends there, for others the cycle renews itself and goes on. (Jha 79)

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